

11TH CTV

back to the sense of the city

CITY AS A WORK OF ART

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Abstract

Impressional and comparative reflection about the existence and the operation of selected cities in a context of their unique aesthetics and beauty, by a painter, draftsman and designer, the chancellor of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. A description of a direct experience of the city seen as an open work of art, specific in its structural complexity both in its material and spiritual atmosphere.

The common and widespread association of works of art comes with the automatic adoption of its dimensions, measurements, size. The last parameter here is more ambiguous, because it may also specify the work as outstanding and of priceless artistic value. What I am interested in, in this case, is the material scale of the object, an artifact, which we rather associate with dimensions - when it comes to painting, graphics and sculpture - from a few centimeters to five or even tens of meters in length or a few centimeters or tens of meters in height. Let me give you an example: **historical paintings of Jan Matejko** (up to 10 meters in length), **"Panorama Racławicka" by Jan and Wojciech Kossak** (the image has a total length of 114 m and height of 15 m, which occupies 1,800 sq. m of fabric), the famous **"Guernica" by Pablo Picasso** (size 3.5 by almost 8 meters) or even the paintings of considerable dimensions by the **twentieth-century hyper-realists (eg Franz Gertsch and Chuck Close)**, or a huge installation, presented in the Grand Palais in Paris entitled the **"Leviathan"** (height: 35 meters) by the British sculptor, **Anish Kapoor**. Scaling up also applies to everyday objects, such as matches or chairs. There are, circulating in public, works such as the 5 meter **matches by prof. Anthony Porczak** of the Academy of Fine Arts and the **chair by Tadeusz Kantor**, the world-renowned creator of the theater of death, exhibited in the urban space in Wrocław, with a height of 9 meters!

One needs to remember the sculptures of considerable size, the outdoor ones too, with a clear example of the carved stone **heads of the Olmecs** in Mexico, the **heads of volcanic tuff on the Easter Island** (the largest measures approx. 21 m height), the **"Statue of Liberty"** in New York (46.5 m in height, and together with the base 93 m), the great **statue of Christ towering over Rio de Janeiro** (30 m in height), even higher **statue of Christ the King in Swiebodzin** in Poland (33 m in height) or the heads of **four US presidents carved in stone rock on Mount**

Rushmore, South Dakota (each with busts of presidents measures 18 meters in height, and the whole monument covers an area of 5 square kilometers).

Most of the works of art, however, are relatively small, tailored to the scale of human perception and reception, the proportion of architecture, to be experienced and observed in a public space, including the space among the buildings of the city. Work of art therefore is an object that could be located in a closet, a room, assembly hall, a mausoleum, a church, a palace, museum hall, airport hall, conference auditorium, and outside, in the open space, in a courtyard, square, street, along the avenue, in the market area, in a park, amphitheater, on a hill, at the top of the mountain, and the more surprising places ... Taking into account just the urban space there's little doubt that almost every architectural building in every town or a spatial object of any particular use can sometimes be a work art ... Among them are outstanding and brilliant works, and so it can be the case, with the great and giant cities of the world, in all thier structural complexity...

Among the examples of spaces where we can meet with a located work of art, I include the smaller components of the city such as: squares, plazas, streets, avenues, parks, etc., and thus, I found myself in a bit of a dilemma. The work of art can be found in every part of the city, also within the architecture, but the city itself, in all its complexity and under the open sky, can it be a work of art ...? Well ... I do not think that anyone would deny that! **Cities - especially those inconceivably fast-growing, the multimillion giants - are, in their structurally bound urban planning, great works of art** created during the turbulent centuries by succeeding generations developing the creative thought of their predecessors !!! **The city, as a giant work of art is a remarkable, very complex and complicated topic to grasp and describe, and this involves of course, one of the most powerful archetypes of the human condition, namely the instinctive need to live in the cluster, a joint settlement, village, town, metropolis, a multimillion giant as well.** The first justification for the people's desire to settle initially in a limited space - is the need for security, the common multiplying of the quality of life and social luxury, the establishment of services and the relative proximity of the commercial, cultural spheres and areas, or those facilitating travel (eg. railway stations, airports). Not without significance here is also the different, somewhat opposite archetype: the need for a change of place, the environment, the mobility between cities, which is associated with the myth of traveling and travel, mystical pilgrimage, satisfying curiosity through learning about other cultures and civilizations, discovering new lands and new living spaces. The city - seems to be the essence of civilization and expansive efforts in a given era. The great conqueror of the ancient world, Alexander the Macedonian, established the cities (several of **Alexandrias**) in the large areas he took over and let them grow into orgiastic mix of nationalities and races. Alexander the Great didn't generally destroy the culture and beauty of the conquered **Babylon**, nonetheless he burned **Persepolis**, the capital of the Persian Empire from the sixth century BC. But, as history of his life had shown, he had to constantly gain new spaces and cultivate the trade of war. On the back of his horse and with his sword in hand he probably won more territories than Adolf Hitler in the twentieth-century era of rapid progress of science and industry development. Each of these and other totalitarian conquerors took over the cities, because they were a symbol of concentration of everything that was the best and most valuable

in the country! Saladin, besieging and capturing **Jerusalem**, when asked what it is for him, instinctively replied "nothing", then quickly he turned to the Christian defenders of the city and said, "everything."

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When briefly describing and comparing the selected cities as giant works of art, I will rely mostly on my own sensations, which I experienced when entering by bus or plane into those cities, living in them and walking around them. There are other wonderful cities in the world in which I have not been, and which can not be neglected because of their undeniable artistic and historical value. They are, in their complex body, packed with architectural masterpieces of art and collections of masterpieces found in the great museums and art galleries. My travels took me, in North America, to: **Toronto, Montreal, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles**, in Europe to: **Paris, London, Amsterdam, Munich, Nuremberg, Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Venice, Florence, Rijeka, Trogir, Dubrovnik, Kotor**, the small **Bardejov** in Slovakia. I still have ahead of me a travel to **Jerusalem, Istanbul and Shenzhen**, to the beautifully situated **towns in the Swiss Alps**. Among the Polish cities I should mention the charms of Wrocław, Gdańsk, Toruń and Kraków, but only because of their picturesque old towns, a tastefulness of their centers and the specific genius loci. The world is big, vast and sometimes difficult to reach, but today you can get almost anywhere quickly. Compared to the high mountains and the cavernous depths of the seas and oceans, cities are tumultuous, colorful and vivid. They hold many temptations, attractions and comforts. It also seems that they are safer and more interesting, more volatile and colorful, they satisfy human, individual and social needs. They guarantee a quick exchange of services, up to date information, popularization of different values and the broadcast of affairs. It is easier to grow artistically in the city and to organize the conditions to create works of art, play sports, and secure yourself against the dangers of direct contact with nature and exposure to the elements. Cities are gigantic works of art, built with an effort of human hands as a result of development, in order to tame and subdue the space to suit human needs. We feel safer in a cluster, of course, only to some extent, because the syndrome of loneliness can get to us even in densely populated areas, as within the Internet, with its millions of connections. Paradoxically, hidden in separate segments of the intimate and private space, we have close at hand all things social and accumulated over the years, like a book in a home library. We have at hand almost everything, but is it not, in some sense, an illusion, an effect that is called a "growth trap" by sociologists today. But can we fully revive the urban space and live in it with the emotional intensity and fulfillment, that can be creative and fortunate, safe and comfortable, stable and enabling a dignified living? Will we not, in a maze of buildings and streets, discover our loneliness and confusion ...? Let me remind you the first sentence of my speech: scale, scale-up, merciless expansion, and external circumstances of various kinds, such as: invasions, natural disasters, migration, climate change, that throughout the history of mankind broke down the development of many powerful and expansive cities! Sometimes, after millennia, centuries and now, these

lost and forgotten cities are being re-discovered, among them: **Troy, Petra, Machu Picchu, Pompeii, Carthage, Mohenjo Daro, Tikal, Palenque, ...**

Considering the gigantic spaces of big cities raises questions about their origins, the reasons for their creation, expansion, total development and prosperity. What is that great visionary and long-term task at the beginning, for the founders and developers, architects and builders of cities? It seems that the answer is simple, but not so easy to execute in reality: **it takes to integrate the consciously designed architectural agglomeration in the natural open space, a work that is continued in the following years and centuries by other architects and builders.** Cities - are often located on both sides of the bed of a large river, on the shores of seas and lakes, on islands, on hills, below the peaks of the mountains and on their slopes, on flat terrain stretching to the horizon and beyond. The mentioned **Tikal** and **Palenque** - Mayan cities in Guatemala, suddenly abandoned by the Indian population, overgrown and entangled by the trees and branches of wild bush. One of the wonders of the world: the stone and stepped **Machu Picchu** left by the Incas in the Peruvian Andes at an altitude of almost 2.5 thousand meters above the sea level. The sunken cities of mythical **Atlantis**, the discovered prehistoric cities of **Troy, Petra**, extorted from mythology and memory, the recently discovered **City of Jaguar** in the rainforest on the border between Honduras and Nicaragua in Central America. Cityscapes are a common theme in the works of painters. Let me just remind us: **the fantastic cities** in the pictures of the naive artist **Nikifor of Krynica** or the **mystical blocks of flats and churches** in the paintings by **Jerzy Nowosielski**, the houses in Vienna fabulously painted by the artist **Hundertwasser**... Ghost cities, giants, poetic villages, forts, ports and monastery complexes, working-class districts, designed globally, as for example the mining **Nikiszowiec** in the early twentieth century, near Katowice. I have seen various cities with my own eyes, admired their natural location and how they fit the landscape surrounding them: a tiny, medieval **Trogir** - made with light stone on the Croatian island, situated between the mainland and the Divo Island. Montenegrin **Kotor**, situated on the wonderful Bay of Kotor, attached to the steep slope. **Venice** - drenched from all sides by water, flooded by the sea, with gondolas and carnival masks, with a wonderful church of St. Mark. **Paris** - with the smell of cookies in the subway, stunning art collections in the Louvre, with the hill Montmartre and the white Sacre Couer somehow hovering above the city, and in the opposite direction with an iron Eiffel Tower. **Amsterdam** - cut by the canals, with the tenements like small pieces of furniture. **Dubrovnik** - in its fortified character, defending itself from invasions of foreign armies from the side of the Adriatic Sea. **Vienna** - with its architectural structure of centuries, a little heavy in its old buildings, with a golden ball of the House of the Vienna Secession, but reminding me that Sarah Brightman, with her miraculous voice, sang there in the Gothic Cathedral of St. Stephen, one of the most beautiful concerts. American giant cities: **New York** with Manhattan, where I heard from Piotr Skrzynecki: "Let's get out of here. This is the Tower of Babel", and **Los Angeles**, admired by me at night from the a top of a hill, flat, illuminated with thousands of lights, as an airstrip for interplanetary spacecrafts on an alien planet. I watch the cities and explore them with open senses. I admire the location, the planning concept as a whole, individual buildings and small details. I enter the interiors of palaces, temples, museums, residences. Airports, train

stations, stadiums, amphitheatres, parks, squares, courtyards, narrow streets in **Trogir** and stone gaps in the tiny fishing village of **Betina** on the Murter island in Croatia ...

I am getting closer to the next town, coming in by plane, by a bus, by a car, on the bike, I am coming on foot. I look around. **Cities and towns in Switzerland, England, Germany, Spain, France, are designed with a lot of taste, structural and functional thought, buildings designed and built in beautiful proportions, structures, walls and roofs in harmony with the environment, landscape, terrain, the vast horizon.** What interests me, however, is being in the city center, walking around it, watching, breathing the city, its atmosphere, saturating myself with the view and the perspective of the streets, with the beauty of temples, palaces, museums and houses, with the decay of the old defensive walls and gates. This is how I visited **Paris, Amsterdam, Florence, Venice, Dubrovnik, Trogir, Split, Kotor, Budva, Prague, Nuremberg, Munich, Vienna, Lvov, Bardiejev, Nin, Kazimierz by the Vistula River** and many other cities and towns ... But it was always the return to **Krakow** that allowed me to sense this unique atmosphere, the magic, the genius loci of the city, which I dreamed about as a child and which I can sense with my eyes closed. When I was a student (in 1977-1982) in my mind Paris decidedly competed with Krakow, but it lost, and cities unknown become a source of constant desire to reach them. The need to travel and explore new lands and beautiful towns became the permanent hunger boosting the greedy intensity of life. So which of the thousands of beautiful cities should I choose now, where should I go? I decided on the idea of the oldest cities in the world, but those that are thousands years old! Are they still accessible? I learned quickly, by connecting my curiosity with the knowledge stored in the cloud online. It is, after all, among others.: **Athens and Argos** in Greece, **Jerusalem** in Israel, **Plovdiv** in Bulgaria, **Damascus** and **Aleppo** in Syria, **Jericho** in Palestine, **Cadiz** in Spain, **Luoyang** in China and **Yazd, Sidon** and **Byblos** in Iran, as well as the approximately 3.5 thousand years old, inexplicably filled with radioactive rays, **Mohenjo-Daro** in Pakistan.

The cities, and their districts, sometimes different from the rest, originated from the pragmatic need of organizing social life and identity of single human being, a social unit, and even the state, because there existed throughout the history the state - cities. **The entire material and defensive infrastructure, and the complex web of social relations, the exchange of potentials and continuous possibilities of enrichment in a condensed area meant the more rapid development and facilitated communication.** Professional communities and groups, institutions, offices, housing estates, public buildings, museums, hotels, concert halls, theaters, railway stations, airports, stadiums, parks - were initially established in a relatively small area. The close distances allowed for intensive use of the luxury of the entirety of urban facilities, both architectural and social. With time, the cities grew to unimaginable scale and size, and nowadays we have more than 30 and 20 million giants: **Tokyo** in Japan (approx. 32.5 million inhabitants), **Dehli** in India (approx. 21.9 million), **Mexico City** in Mexico (approx. 20.1 million), **New York** in the US (approx. 20.1 million), **Shanghai** in China (approx. 19.6 million), **Sao Paulo** in Brazil (o. 19.6 million) ... about 15 million people live in **Beijing** and **Shenzhen** in China, **Dhaka** in Bangladesh, **Calcutta** in India, **Buenos Aires** in Argentina, **Los Angeles** in the USA, **Mumbai** in India. However when asked about the unusual, most beautiful cities, wonderful masterpieces to be built and blooming for hundreds of years thanks to the great

architects and builders, most of the travelers will point to the famous and unique: **Venice, Paris, Amsterdam, Bern, Cadiz, San Francisco, Dubrovnik, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, Istanbul**, and the charming in their small scale, provincial towns, poetic gems, such as **Bardejov** in Slovakia, **Trogir** and **Motovun** in Croatia, **Manarola** in Italy in Liguria, **Krumlov** in the Czech Republic, **Kotor** in Montenegro and many many other beautiful and specifically small architectural wonders fitted with mastery to the natural environment, the terrain, by generations of eminent architects - artists ...

To summarize my impression-like reflections on the cities - works of art, merely outlining the issues, I ask the question: **what decides, which components determine that the city in all its gigantic complexity and openness is a work of art?** From the point of view of a painter and a pilgrim to various cities to experience primarily artistic sensations, the basic element seems to be, first of all: **the adapting of buildings to the conditions of the natural environment, incorporation of designed objects to the architectural landscape and the creative clash or harmonization with the character of the natural area, the chosen location.** The second element is: **the concept of the urban planning as a whole.** The third - **spatial, functional and aesthetic relations, between individual components, such as single buildings, special buildings towering over the city, temples, centers called the markets, avenues, streets, parks, squares, courtyards around and inside the tenements.** If all this presents a high artistic level and is incorporated in an attractive environment - then such a city is an obvious work of art, in addition one moving in time, constantly supplementing its component parts, thus being a great architectural and natural organism, changing smoothly and uniquely, just as human life ...

To conclude, I will present to you, in a Cracovian way, a poetic text describing the Sydney Opera House, seen through the eyes of the unforgettable Marek Grechuta. It is a description of the world-famous architectural object, seen in the artist's imagination in a unique and special way:

OPERA W SYDNEY (Sydney Opera House) a song by **Marek Grechuta**

*Jakby wypłynął nagle, bezszelestnie w wietrze
Na ciemnej fali migocącej w światłach miasta
Statek o żaglach w wielkich muszlach, metr po metrze
Zbliżał się do mnie, wyobraźnię mą przerastał*

*Musze szumiały echem pięknej kantyleny
W żaglach trzepotał jeszcze powiew entuzjazmu
A ja słyszałem gdzieś w oddali śpiew syreny
To był hymn duszy oderwanej od marazmu*

Ja nie widziałem nigdzie w świecie takiej zjawy

A przecież wiele miejsc na ziemi z piękna słynie

Zamykam oczy i zasypiam bez obawy

Bo ten zagłowiec z mej pamięci nie odpłynie

The longer I am involved in art, the more interested I become in what could be left by the prehistoric and ancient civilizations thousands of years ago. I am fascinated by their culture and art, architecture, scientific achievements, knowledge of the universe, their approach to the absolute, to the elements of life and the mystery of death. However, the modern, giant cities - the works of outstanding technology and ideas, the unlimited creativity and imagination of architects - evoke no less awe and admiration ... Therefore, to all the great architects and builders of human civilization and cities I dedicate my briefly written, modest admiration, tribute and the highest appreciation...

